

The Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI®): A Tool for Understanding and Improving Relationships

1. Introduction

The Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI) is a globally recognised tool for improving relationships and managing conflict. It is used in businesses for leadership training, team building, conflict management and a host of other applications. It is used in counselling for understanding motivations, conflict triggers and interpersonal communications among many other issues. It is completed by approximately 650,000 people worldwide each year.

The objectives of this document are to introduce the SDI to those interested in improving relations and managing conflict and to present several case studies showing how the SDI can be used as a tool for understanding and predicting behaviour as well as understanding and managing conflict.

2. Relationship Awareness Theory

Relationship Awareness Theory, the theoretical basis of the SDI, was created and developed in the mid-twentieth century by Elias H. Porter, colleague of Carl Rogers. Porter was a clinical psychologist and worked at the University of Chicago before moving to UCLA where he spent the rest of his academic career. He founded Personal Strengths Publishing in 1972 and was owner and CEO until his death in 1987.

Porter's work aligns with the humanistic movement in psychology represented by Rogers, Tolman, Maslow and others. His goals in his work were to provide a means for continuing development of the 'healthy individual'. That is to say, while traditional psychotherapeutic counselling focused more on pathological behaviour, Porter wished to give all individuals tools for self-actualisation. Porter's development of a psychometric tool is a departure from the pure humanistic psychological movement in that he has shown that we have much in common with other humans and understanding motivations as well as the differences in motivations between individuals can help us to communicate better, to recognise and avoid conflict, or if already involved in a conflictual situation, to give us tools for managing it.

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2.1 The Four Basic Principles

Porter's theory is based on four principles that he observed throughout his career as a counsellor and clinician:

1. We do what we do in order to feel good about ourselves (to gain self-esteem).
2. We have two approaches to dealing with the outside world: one when all is going well and we feel good about ourselves and the second, when we are in conflict or opposition.
3. A personal weakness is nothing more than an overdone strength, or a misapplied strength.
4. We see the world through our own filter that influences our interpretation of all we observe.

2.1.1 The First Principle

This principle is related to the Maslow self-esteem theory that has been taken up as a general principle in Humanistic Psychology. One of our basic needs is that of self-esteem and also the esteem of others. In order to satisfy this need, we are able to choose particular behaviours. The idea that we have choice in our behaviour is one of the pillars of the theory.

2.1.2 The Second Principle

This principle is based on Porter's clinical and counselling experiences. He observed that we have one set of means (motivations) by which we direct our behaviour if all is going well. One might try to think of many different life situations where different motivations might come into play, but Porter noticed that the only situation that produced another approach to our own behaviour management was when we found ourselves in conflict. Thus, we have one set of internal rules, that guide us in all of life's situations when we are *not* in conflict (see also 'Purposive Behaviour' by Tolman), and potentially another set of internal rules that would take over in times of conflict.

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The first set of internal rules we call the Motivational Value System® (MVS) and the guiding principles therein (we will see many examples later) are considered to be our strengths. These strengths, for example compassion and the need to help others, are generally needed in society, appreciated by others, and give us a sense of positive self-esteem.

The second set of internal rules we call the conflict sequence (CS). This set of rules is not required to change with respect to the MVS, but in most cases it does depart from the MVS. That is to say, we potentially use another set of internal rules when we are in conflict with the objective of resolving the conflict and returning to our MVS (and peace).

2.1.3 The Third Principle

In observing his clients, Porter noticed that some behaviours were not necessarily appreciated by others and thus were not successful in creating or increasing our self-esteem. When a strength is exaggerated, or overdone, it can become a weakness. Thus, the person who wishes to help but overdoes it by imposing their help on another will not be appreciated by the other. Similarly, if we try to use a strength that is not really in our nature, we risk not applying the strength properly. So, the helpful person who may not naturally like to give orders, but finds himself in a situation that calls for it, may possibly not have the effectiveness of one whose nature it is to give orders.

2.1.4 The Fourth Principle

This fourth principle yields some of the most valuable lessons of the theory and is quite useful in helping to improve interpersonal relationships. The principle says that we do 'see the world through our own glasses' and that this view could potentially be distorted by our natural prejudices. For example, someone who is forceful and directive may have a natural disdain for those who are not forceful and directive.

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Thus, when confronted by someone whose nature it is not to assert themselves strongly and immediately, the forceful person could see the other as weak and cowardly. In truth, this prejudice is not necessarily justified and could be no more than a difference in preferences. Awareness of this judgemental tendency can help us to avoid judging too quickly and can encourage us to investigate the nature of the other person before drawing conclusions.

2.2 Graphical-Visual Representation of the Results

Porter identified three basic tendencies that people may have. Some individuals, however, can appear as blends of two of these tendencies or of all three. He also used a colour scheme to identify the tendencies and make them easier to assimilate and use. Thanks to this facility of integration and understanding, clients who are working with the SDI will pick it up and use it immediately to understand all of their relationships, both personal and professional.

The three tendencies correspond to three basic Motivational Value Systems which we will see in more detail later. Essentially, the three basic tendencies are:

Blue – the altruistic-nurturing type

Red – the assertive-directing type

Green – the analytic-autonomising type.

As indicated above, some individuals will not fall completely into one of these categories, but will be a blend of two or even all three.

Finally, the results will be shown on a coloured triangle with a blue, a red and a green axis. We will see all of these profiles in detail in section 3.2.

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3. The SDI

3.1 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire that allows us to apply Relationship Awareness Theory to understand and improve our relationships, and to identify the types discussed in the preceding section, is the Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI®). Porter developed this instrument himself from the 1940s to the 1970s when it was refined, validated and reliable enough to be in demand commercially. The questionnaire consists of 20 questions, 10 about the person in times of peace, when all is going well, and 10 about the person in times of conflict and opposition.

Each question begins with a 'stem' and is followed by three different ways of finishing the sentence. The respondent must take 10 points and distribute them among the three endings corresponding to the frequency with which each ending would apply to their life. For example:

I usually gain the most for myself by being.....

- a. friendly and outgoing as much as possible.*
- b. alert to any and all opportunities.*
- c. very careful as to what I commit myself to.*

The respondent then distributes a total of 10 points among the endings, for example 3 for a, 7 for b and 0 for c. Notice that $3 + 7 + 0 = 10$, and that 0 would indicate that the ending would never be a motivation for this person.

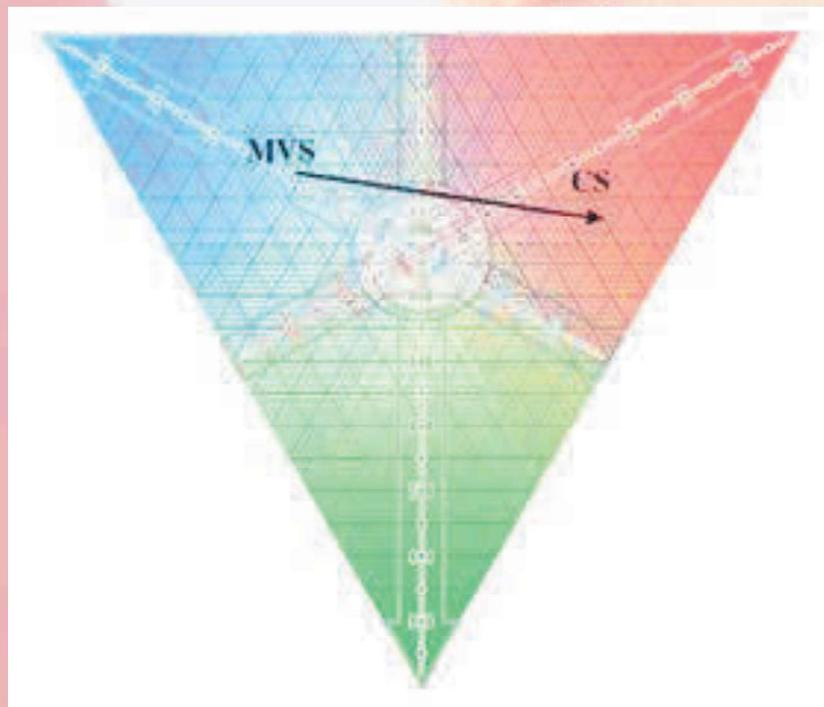
There is a total of 10 questions, so 100 points in times of peace, and similarly 100 points in time of conflict. The results are presented as 'points' on a triangle that we will see in the next section.

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3.2 The Motivational Value System®

The results from the questionnaire yield a 'blue total' a 'red total' and a 'green total'. An important aspect of this theory is that we are dealing with traits – characteristics that exist more or less permanently in our personality with varying degrees of importance (or frequency). The collection of frequencies of these motivational traits is called the Motivational Value System® (MVS) for the individual and remains rather constant throughout life. Of course, our values and behaviours may change, but the underlying MVS that drives our behaviour is always looking for the same type of gratification for our self-esteem.

Since there are three basic components that are measured on a continuous scale and the totals sum to 100, the results may be represented on a triangle ('blue + red + green = 100' in the three dimensional space of (blue, red, green)). Since we have two such sets of 10 questions, one in peace and one in conflict, there are two points in the triangle. The first point is the Motivational Value System, our way of dealing with the world when all is going well. The second point (the pointed end of the arrow) is the Conflict Sequence (CS) and represents our way of dealing with conflict. Here is what we have so far:



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To simplify the interpretation, we identify seven regions of the triangle that we call the Motivational Value Systems. Strictly speaking, there are an infinite number of possibilities, but the grouping into regions allows us enough similarity among those persons in the region:

	<p>3.2.1 Blue – the altruistic-nurturing type Protection, growth and welfare of others; motivated by helping others. do not want to be a burden, support a strong leader</p>
	<p>3.2.2 Red – the assertive-directing type Task accomplishment, organisation of people, time, money and any other resources to achieve desired results; motivated by winning, making progress, fixed on goals</p>
	<p>3.3.3 Green – the analytic-autonomising type Assurance that things have been properly thought out; meaningful order being established and maintained; motivated by logic, structure, principles, details, completeness</p>
	<p>3.3.4 Hub – the flexible-cohering Flexibility, welfare of the group, concern for the members of the group and for belonging in the group; motivated by team work, options, flexibility, variety, will “fill in the missing gap”</p>
	<p>3.3.5 Red-Blue – the assertive-nurturing type Protection, growth and welfare of others through task accomplishment and leadership; motivated by helping others achieve their goals, mentors, coaches</p>
	<p>3.3.6 Red-Green – the judicious-competing type Intelligent assertiveness, justice, leadership, order and fairness in competition; motivated by strategy, principles, winning</p>
	<p>3.3.7 Blue-Green – the cautious-supporting type Affirming and developing self-sufficiency in self and others, thoughtful helpfulness with regard for justice; motivated by helping others help themselves</p>

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3.3 The Conflict Sequence

Conflict does not always take the same form from one person to another, even for people with the same Motivational Value System. This is observable and shown by Porter's theory and the SDI. The detailed analysis of conflict is one aspect that sets the SDI apart from other instruments of this type.

According to the theory, conflict, if left unresolved, escalates through three stages. In the first stage, the person tries to take into account the other person, the problem and himself. If the conflict is not resolved in the first stage and escalates to the second stage, the person will concentrate on the problem and himself. The 'other person' drops out of their consideration. This phenomenon is why conflict is best resolved in the first stage – while the person is still trying to take the other into account. If escalated to the third stage, the person will only be concerned with self-preservation. Both the problem and the other have dropped out of the considerations altogether.

How does one go into conflict? Usually, conflict is triggered when one of the person's cherished values (from the Motivational Value System) has been compromised, threatened or otherwise perceived as attacked. For example, in a meeting, the group is about to make a decision to proceed knowing that some perhaps important information is missing, but the team is under time pressure. The 'Green' person in the group, who is motivated by completeness and careful consideration before making a decision, protests and is told 'Sorry, we don't have time for that. We've got to get the project underway.' This disdain for the Green's most cherished values will most likely send him into conflict.

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3.4 Arrow Dynamics

3.4.1 Simple Arrow Dynamics

The example on page 7 is of someone who is Blue in times when things are going well. As we discussed earlier, Blues (altruistic-nurturing types) are usually concerned with the welfare of others, do not want to be a burden to others, like to support a strong leader etc. If this particular person (whose arrow is on page 7) goes into conflict, the first stage is red – the person will rise to the challenge to defend himself. The theory (shown below) continues to say that, if the person were to be pushed into the second stage, he would use 'green' techniques to continue to try to resolve the conflict, that is to say, pull back and analyse the situation. He would not be concerned with the other person, but with the problem and himself. Finally, if the person was pushed into the third stage, he would surrender completely. The third stage conflict should be taken seriously; some believe that experiencing it can cause psychological damage. At least, it is an experience that will mark the person for a long time to come.

Internal Experience in Conflict				
CONFLICT STAGE	FOCUS ON	BLUE	RED	GREEN
1	Self Problem Other	Simply being accommodating to the needs of others	Simply rising to the challenge being offered	Simply being prudently cautious
2	Self Problem Other	Giving in and letting the opposition have its way	Having to fight off the opposition	Trying to escape from the opposition
3	Self Problem Other	Having been completely defeated	Having to fight for one's life	Having to retreat completely

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Another aspect of arrow dynamics is the length of the arrow. Generally, a change in arrow length is accompanied by a corresponding change in behaviour and it becomes evident to those in the person's entourage that the person is in conflict. On the other hand, someone with a very short arrow will not change perceptibly on the exterior in conflict, but the person's internal emotions are showing no doubt whatsoever that the person is in conflict. The person sometimes wonders why the others cannot tell that he is in conflict. Good advice to such a person is to develop ways to signal to others when he is in conflict.

3.4.2 Composite Arrow Dynamics

A particularly useful application of the SDI is to plot all the arrows of the team on the same triangle. From the MVS, we see what is important to each person – and we have a good idea of the best way to communicate with them: that is to say, by concentrating on the issues that are of the most importance for the person. In the same vein, we also see what the potential conflict triggers are. They are those behaviours that will threaten one of the values in the MVS, or be perceived as threatened, violated or attacked.

When looking at the arrows for an entire group, we see first whether there are any 'blind spots' in the group; i.e. any missing colours or MVSs. A team with no redness will find it more difficult to push forward toward the goals and may risk long, perhaps too long, discussions of options, alternatives, peripheral subjects, principles etc. A management group, for example, with little or no 'blueness' will risk making decisions that do not take the human element into account, or that focus on the logic, strategic or goal-orientation aspects of the decision.